Revitalization of Regional Languages in France Through Immersion

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Introduction

School-based language immersion programs aim for additive bilingualism by providing a significant portion (usually at least 50% during elementary school years) of students' subject-matter instruction through the medium of an additional language. The term 'immersion' was first used in this way by Lambert and Tucker (1972) to describe their study of an "experiment" in bilingual education that began in 1965 in St. Lambert, Quebec, where English-speaking parents were concerned that traditional second language teaching methods would not enable their children to develop sufficient levels of proficiency in French to compete for jobs in a province where French was soon to be adopted as the sole official language.

Lambert and Tucker's (1972) seminal study of this early immersion initiative examined two groups of English-speaking children who were taught exclusively through the medium of French in kindergarten and Grade 1 and then mainly in French (except for two half-hour daily periods of English language arts) in Grades 2, 3, and 4. The widely disseminated results were positive with respect to the children's language development in both English and French, as well as their academic achievement and affective development. Other immersion programs spread quickly in the Montreal area, then across Canada and were modified in some contexts to include alternative entry points and variable proportions of first and second language instruction. Immersion programs have since been developed to teach various languages in a wide range of contexts around the world (Johnson & Swain, 1997).

Many immersion programs have been designed to promote the learning of a second official language, as in the case of French immersion in Canada, Swedish immersion in Finland, Catalan and Basque immersion in Spain, Irish immersion in Ireland, and Gaelic immersion in Scotland. Other programs have been designed to promote the learning of indigenous languages such as Maori in New Zealand and Hawaiian in the US. In France, programs based on the immersion model have been implemented to teach regional languages such as Occitan, Basque, and Catalan in the south, Corsican on the island of Corsica

(southeast of the French mainland), Breton in the northwest, and German in the eastern regions of Alsace and Moselle. Because relatively little has been published in English about educational initiatives to revitalize regional languages in France, we believe that a focus on these initiatives is befitting of an edited volume published in honour of Wallace Lambert.

Bilingual Education Supporting Regional Languages in France

From the point of view of language planning in education, France has been and still remains reticent towards any type of system that might undermine the status of French as the sole language of education (see Costa & Lambert, 2009). However, as we point out in this section, changes in favour of bilingual education to support regional languages are apparent in the establishment of total immersion programs in the private sector and partial immersion programs in the public sector.

Public education that was both free and non-religious came into being in France under the Third Republic (1870-1940) bringing with it the teaching of French as the only national language at the expense of all regional languages—or "provincial" languages as they were called in the 19th century. It was only in 1951 that the Loi Deixonne allowed some regional languages—namely Basque, Breton, Catalan, and Occitan—to be taught, under certain conditions, outside normal school hours. Alsatian and Corsican, because they were considered dialects of German and Italian, respectively, were excluded; Corsican was only integrated later in the 1970s. In Alsace, the education system provides facilities for standard German only.

In the 1970s, when the post-war generations who had been active in promoting languages such as Basque, Breton, and Occitan throughout the 1960s reached the age of parenting, they were keen to develop their own bilingual education system. The first Basque Ikastola was founded in the French part of the Basque Country as early as 1969, and served as a model for other initiatives across France. It was followed by the first Bressola school in the French part of Catalonia, which was founded in 1976. The first Breton Diwan primary school was established in 1977. In the Occitan-speaking regions in the south of France, the first Calandreta school was established in 1979. Interestingly, parents in neither Corsica nor Alsace successfully sought to follow this model, and no parent-run private immersion schools exist there now.

These private yet secular schools operate according to similar principles. For example, the Diwan schools give "much greater prominence to Breton than to French in the classroom during the early primary years, so as to ensure effective acquisition of Breton" (Rogers & McLeod, 2006, p. 355). Similarly, in the Calandreta schools, pre-primary education is solely in Occitan, and pupils learn to read and write in that language. French is introduced at the age of 7, once the pupils can read, and occupies 45 minutes a day (see Costa, 2010). The French language part is done by a separate teacher, and often in a separate room. Pupils are required not to mix languages, and the schools thus function largely on the preconception that bilingual education amounts to a double monolingual education. However, it must be said that as far as the Calandreta model is concerned, pupils do frequently mix languages in their everyday interactions, and that teachers of French are also speakers of Occitan, thus enabling the creation of links between both languages. In the Calandreta system, a strong emphasis is also put on other Romance languages, such as Catalan or Italian. The Calandreta system also follows the Freinet model of education, which is a strong attraction for parents, possibly more than bilingualism itself (on the motivations of parents, see also Moal, 2007, for a study in Brittany).

In 1982, public education through the medium of regional languages was officially authorized for the first time in France, leading to the creation of bilingual streams or sections (*classes bilingues*) in otherwise monolingual French schools. Such schools now exist across the country in Corsica, the Occitan-speaking regions of southern France, Catalonia, the Basque Country, Brittany, and in Alsace and Moselle (in standard German). These regions are identified on the map of France in Figure 1. Although Flemish, Langue d'oïl, and Francoprovençal are also identified on this map, there is no official provision of bilingual education for these languages in France.

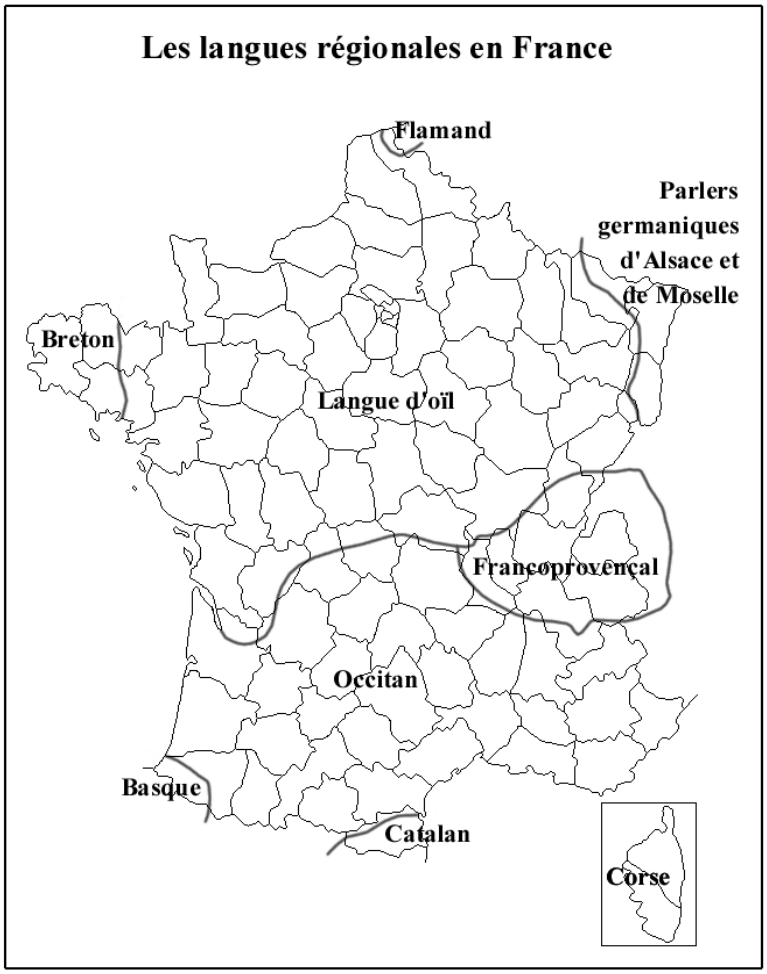

Figure 1: Regional languages in France (from Bert, 2001)

Initially, the proportion of teaching time devoted to each language in public schools was to be determined at the school level but, since 1995, '*parité scolaire*' has been mandated so that both French and the target regional language share equal time (50/50) in the school curriculum. Some schools have entire days devoted to one language or another, while in others, one language is used in the morning and the other in the afternoon. This latter option often results in "minor" subjects (such as art) being taught in the regional language, while more 'serious' subjects are taught through French. Other schools, where a single teacher teaches both languages, have chosen to alternate regularly so that all subjects can be taught through both languages (see Cortier & Di Meglio, 2008a,b). More recently, bilingual streams can be offered at secondary level, although they mostly consist of more hours of language classes and only one subject (often history-geography) taught through the regional language.

Despite the resemblances in the organisational patterns outlined above, each context should be seen as very specific. For example, whereas the Catalan and Basque languages are backed by substantial populations of speakers in Spain, and also by television and radio channels, this is not the case for Occitan, Corsican, or Breton. Some languages (e.g., Basque and Corsican) still witness a fair rate of intergenerational transmission, while others (such as Occitan and Breton) clearly do not (Héran, Filhon, & Deprez, 2002). In the case of Breton, for example, while there were 1,158,000 speakers in 1928, only 304,000 people declared they could speak Breton in 1997 (Rogers & McLeod, 2006; see also Le Nevez, 2006). In the post World War II period, intergenerational transmission of Breton collapsed so dramatically that almost no children entering primary schools in recent decades have been mother-tongue Breton speakers (Broudic, 2000). Occitan followed a similar pattern (see Sibille, 2002), but over a much wider territory, comprising several regional authorities, making the enactment of a unified language policy much more difficult. These elements contribute to creating very different social conditions in which bilingual education is enacted. Thus, while a Basque-speaking speech community can be found outside the school, such communities do not exist in the case of Occitan and Breton, which remain largely seen as the language of schooling by the pupils involved in these programs. Major differences exist also in terms of the proportion of speakers of a given regional language relative to the size of the actual region. Thus, while Occitan is often said to be the second language in France, with possibly between 600,000 and 3 million speakers (Sibille, 2002), they are unevenly spread out across a huge territory comprising about one third of the whole Metropolitan French territory. Alsatian's possibly 500,000 speakers live in a small area in eastern France along the German border, while Basque is concentrated in only the southwestern part of the French department of the Pyrénées-Atlantiques and Catalan is concentrated in the department of the Pyrénées-Orientales. The teaching of Breton is dispersed across several departments but concentrated mainly in western Brittany.

According to the website of the Fédération pour les languages régionales dans l'enseignement public (FLAREP: http://www.flarep.com/crbst_9.html), the enrolment figures across various regions of France in both public and private schools (elementary and secondary) in 2010-11 are distributed as follows (see Figure 2). Of a total of 66,520 students registered in bilingual programs in which a regional language is the target language, the

regional language is German for 35.3% of these students (*n* = 23,493), Breton for 20.1% (*n* = 13,391), Basque for 17.3% (*n* = 11,532), Occitan for 10.3% (*n* = 6,875), Corsican for 10.6% (*n* = 7,058), and Catalan for 4.6% (*n* = 3,053).

Conclusion

Although France remains generally reticent towards any type of system that might undermine the status of French as the sole language of education (Costa & Lambert, 2009), we have documented in this chapter some changes in this regard that support regional languages through immersion programs. We also pointed out many differences across the regional contexts, but would like to conclude by emphasizing that there are common issues that need to be addressed across the different regions with respect to pedagogical practices and professional development. As Delahousse and Hamez (2010, p. 9) recently remarked in their special issue of *Les Langues Modernes* devoted to the topic of teaching regional languages, bilingual education initiatives across diverse contexts share a common energy that is necessary for designing innovative models and pedagogies.

In their recent special issue of *Language Teaching Research* devoted to content-based language teaching, Lyster and Ballinger (2011) brought together studies conducted across a broad spectrum of instructional settings in order to highlight the diversity of contexts in which additional languages are taught through curricular content. Their aim was to identify convergent issues that could serve as possible avenues for educators and researchers to further explore with the ultimate goal of improving program effectiveness. A common thread running through the studies was the important role played by professional development in the continued success of immersion and content-based instruction. The call for increased professional development is urgent because the odds are such that most teachers have been trained to teach *either* language *or* a non-language subject area, but not both, even though for years there has been a growing consensus in the research literature that immersion and content-based instruction need to be language-rich and discourse-rich (Dalton-Puffer, 2007; Snow, Met, & Genesee, 1989; Lyster, 2007). Challenges in developing, implementing, and sustaining an integrated language-and-content curriculum are apt to arise in contexts where pedagogical issues might not be addressed sufficiently to ensure quality instruction because so much energy needs to be devoted to larger socio-political concerns for securing and

defending rights to implement educational innovations to revitalize and maintain regional languages. Delahousse and Hamez (2010) noted, however, that the teaching of regional languages through early immersion programs in France is leading the way in that country toward innovative language instructional practices: "Une didactique novatrice s'invente et s'affine avec le bilinguisme précoce dont les langues régionales sont en France le principal vecteur" (p. 10).

The teaching of English as a foreign or international language has been given much emphasis in Europe through the rapid spread of content and language integrated learning (CLIL) programs (see Coyle, 2007; Mehisto, Marsh, & Frigols, 2008). In some respects, CLIL and immersion programs are similar insofar as both aim to integrate content and language instruction. Throughout Europe, however, while immersion programs target a range of second and/or regional languages, the focus of CLIL is on foreign languages, which in most programs is English (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2010). Equal or even greater support for the teaching of regional languages in France and elsewhere through bilingual education programs such as immersion would be most fitting as a means to maintain the linguistic diversity that Crystal (2000) and other linguists consider to be more apt to contribute to human development than convergence towards a common lingua franca.

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